

EIGHT SKILLS TO MASTER IN ORDER TO SURVIVE OVERBEARING PARENTS

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The Eight (Plus 1) Essential Skills To Master In Order To Survive Overbearing Parents

- 1.) ASK FOR MORE TIME.**
- 2.) WHAT IS IT YOU WANT?**
- 3.) PROTECT THE NEW TEACHERS.**
- 4.) BE THE PROFESSIONAL.**
- 5.) KNOW YOUR OWN LIMITS.**
- 6.) TAKE IT HIGHER**
- 7.) KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE,
AND YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER.**
- 8.) FIND THE TIME NOW.**
- 9.) AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION
IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE.**

Ask For More Time

In many situations in which an immediate resolution is not needed, it is better to ask for more time rather than make a mistake in how you answer. Additional time allows you to reflect privately on the demands, formulate other options, ask others for advice, and separate the problem from the parent. Extra time allows you to collect additional information from the teachers and guidance counselors. By listening intently to the parent and showing concern regarding the issue, you can be accommodating and avoid an immediate disaster. When you do ask for time to think about a request, always state when you will get back to the parent with a response, and always meet that deadline.

What Is It That You Want?

Many overinvolved or overbearing parents do a wonderful job of explaining what they *don't* want, but they have never really considered what they *do* want. Sometimes acknowledging to a parent that you understand their concern or their request and then asking them what he or she would like you to do about it can help prevent a crisis. If the response is "just fix it!" be in the solution. If you cannot grant a request because of school policy or legal concerns, then say so, but ask for other options in the same breath. "I'm sorry I can't do _____ because of _____, but I am willing to try something else if you have another suggestion." This statement stands a better chance of being accepted by a parent than, "The answer is no and that's final."

Protect The New Teachers

We discussed earlier how some parents are unwilling to make allowances for inexperience and are much more confrontational with new staff members than with seasoned veterans. As a faculty, discuss the situation as it applies to your school and set up policies that assist young teachers in dealing with this type of parent. Here are some ideas that have been tried successfully in schools:

- Establish a comprehensive mentoring program that pairs each new teacher with a veteran teacher for the first year.
- Initiate a school policy prohibiting a staff member from meeting with a parent alone (add a guidance counselor, team teacher, or administrator).
- Take down the directory in the front hall that lists the teachers' for directions or wander halls looking for the correct room if he or she wants to confront a staff member.
- Set up interdisciplinary teams and academies that meet with parents as a group.
- Practice telephone conversations using a school template, and role-play actual scenes from past parent confrontations.

Be the Professional

In any parent meeting, these words are very valuable and always make perfect sense. In our public schools, we must remember that they apply to our own professionalism. If you lose your temper with parent, you have lost the battle. If you yell back at somebody who is shouting at you, there is no hope of compromise.

Don't be affected by threats that are directed at you, and don't direct them at a parent. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated, and do not intimidate a parent. Cursing back at a person who is cursing at you might make you feel better, but it solves nothing. Some educators question the fairness of turning the other cheek, but the only hope for sanity in a confrontational situation is a professional demeanor.

Know Your Own Limits

The best time to seriously consider what you will tolerate from any adult or parent is before a conflict occurs. All of us have different points at which "enough is enough." We strongly suggest that you know your own limits before you are pushed to enforce them. Whether you consider such limits rules live by, personal standards, or codes of conduct, they must be preestablished and practiced constantly. Allowing one parent 30 minutes to rant and rave while allowing a different parent only 10 minutes creates questions of favoritism and preferential treatment that cloud future issues. It is acceptable to state expectations regarding time limits, behaviors, and language at the start of any meeting. In some cases, it helps establish a more professional atmosphere. The second part of this suggestion is to have a clear idea of what your response will be when a parent goes beyond your personal limits. Educators who have considered what they will do and say when a situation turns ugly stand a better chance of remaining professional. Practice statements such as, "if your profanity continues, I will to end this conference," "I am concerned when you shake your fist and yell at me," "Please stop immediately, I cannot deal effectively with your concern when I am worried about your threats," and "I appreciate your passion for your child, but personally calling me names and insulting my family will not help the situation."

Take It Higher

When a conference or conflict has reached an impasse, this strategy is sometimes the only solution that will allow the meeting to end. The parent wants you to do something, and you have refused several times, but seemingly he or she will not take no for an answer. When faced with a deteriorating situation such as this, try a statement such as, "I don't believe that we can reach a common solution at this point. I have given you my decision, and without further information I cannot change my position. I would encourage you to contact my supervisor and ask him/her to review my decision if you would like. If they instruct me to consider another solution, I will follow their instructions his/her name is _____ and can be reached at (phone number)."

This type of statement reinforces the strategy of asking for more time. Always write the supervisor's name and phone number on a card and hand it to the parent. Immediately after the parent leaves your office, inform your supervisor that the parent is headed their way, the decision that you made, and why you acted as you did. Sometimes overbearing or overinvolved parents will respond more openly and calmly to a central office person than one at the building level. Do not overuse this strategy by referring every minor incident to a higher authority. This creates a "sky is falling" environment, and your parent community will begin bypassing your office and start going directly to the top with their problems. If your decision is overturned, you have still done what you thought was right in the situation. Don't whine or complain if this happens—you suggested the alternative.

Keep Your Friends Close and Your Enemies Closer

When parents demand involvement, it may be to an administrator's benefit to structure that involvement on his or her own terms rather than the parents'. Involve this type of parent whenever possible. Seek out the parent's advice on up coming school issues: "I just wanted to run this by you. What do you think?" invite the parent to serve on a school committee or participate in the parent council or parent organization board. Surrounding a negative influence with many positive ones always lessens the impact. If you have the time, attend the meetings the parent becomes a part of so that you can stay abreast of his or her actions. Inviting this parent to make a presentation on career day can result in an eye-opening experience for him or her. Some schools have also adopted this "enemies closer" philosophy by asking parents to serve at the school welcome center, organize community service projects, or assist in the media center.

Find the Time Now

When an overinvolved parent pops in for "just a minute," many educators know that 10 minutes today may save them two hours tomorrow. How a principal handles drop-ins sends a very clear signal to the parent community. If the principal responds by saying, "I don't have time right now," "I can't talk to you today," or "I am busy right now," without any qualifiers, the parent almost always becomes an adversary. If possible, find the time right then, or within 15 minutes, to talk to the parent. ("Just let me finish doing_____, and I will be right with you."). if you are too busy, always qualify your response with an alternative suggestion. When you ask question such as, "Can I call you in about an hour?" "Are you able to come back after lunch?" or "What does your schedule look like around 2:30?"

the scheduled appointment, explain the time constraints by stating, “I can only give you about _____ minutes right now because of _____. We may not be able to reach a solution right now, but I will at least have an opportunity to listen. How does that sound?” these suggestions mesh very easily with the first strategy (asking for more time) and help buy time without seeming annoyed or disinterested.

An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure

There is legal precedence in our country that if no policy is established and practiced before an incident occurs, then any actions taken by the organization after the incident are subject to critical review and may be found arbitrary. Educators who are aware of this find it much easier to be proactive in the establishment of guidelines for dealing with overinvolved parents than to be reactive. Schools that collaboratively develop and implement clear guidelines and expectations for student, staff, and parent behavior do so in an effort to minimize misunderstandings. Though it may be impossible to write a policy for every situation, when a policy exists and is followed, it gives educators more solid ground to stand on when dealing with parents. The examples that follow come from schools across the country. They have all been specifically developed to help educators bring more consistency to their actions and address situations that have occurred in the past. As review the list, if a suggestion addresses an issue at your school, consider writing a corresponding policy. Does your school have a policy that

- Outlines how staffing is done and how many students must sign up for a class in order for it to be included in the master schedule?
- Establishes rules and expectations for school volunteers? (see Appendix C)
- States how fund—raising money will be used, who can authorize its spending, what types of fund—raising are acceptable, and how often these projects may occur?
- Describes expected chaperone behavior on a field trip?
- Tells parents the guidelines for gifts that are given to school and states who will control the use of such material items? For example, a parent donates \$5,000 worth of equipment for the weight room but only wants the football team to use it. How about the parent who buys for LCD projectors for the school and insists that they are only for the science department’s use?
- Defines the school response to a student with AIDS, a gun in the building, a teacher who uses profanity, or a student who is drunk at the senior prom?
- Explains the guidelines for flower or balloon bouquets sent to school in celebration of a student’s birthday?